

**Child Poverty Delivery Plan
progress 2020-2021:
Scrutiny by the Poverty and
Inequality Commission**

**Annex: Findings of workshops
with experts by experience**



May 2021

Annex: Reports from experts by experience workshops

The Poverty and Inequality Commission's [2020-23 Strategic Plan](#) sets out the vision and priorities that guide the Commission's work. The central priority that will drive the Commission's work is to "*amplify the voices of experts by experience to make sure they are part of identifying issues, developing and designing solutions, and scrutinising progress.*"

The Commission believes that people with lived experience bring the knowledge and ideas needed to successfully address poverty and inequality. We spoke with experts by experience in a series of workshop discussions during March and April 2021 to inform our child poverty scrutiny of the Scottish Government.

These workshops were arranged for the Commission by four partner organisations who provide support, advice and other services directly to people. These were [Aberlour](#), [Contact](#), [Fife Gingerbread](#), and [Amina](#). Some of these organisations have a particular focus on supporting groups of people who are particularly at risk from poverty, and the workshops included parents with disabled children, parents with learning disabilities, single parents, and Muslim and minority ethnic women.

The discussions were focussed on topics suggested by the Commission and we also provided optional supporting resources and fact sheets to participants. However, the workshops themselves were led by staff from the organisations who worked directly with the participants and they had discretion in how to best structure and approach the workshops. Staff from the Commission secretariat observed and took a record of the discussion, except for the Amina workshops. The Amina workshops were run only by Amina staff in order to create a conducive and safe environment for the women who participated.

The aims were to cover the following topics in each discussion:

- To find out whether experts by experience noticed any changes in support for families on low incomes over the last few years (both pre and post COVID-19)
- To get the views of experts by experience on whether they think the actions in the Scottish Government's child poverty delivery plan will make a difference to people on low incomes
- To identify actions that the Scottish Government needs to take or things it should do differently to help families on low incomes

Because the management of the workshops were responsive to what the participants wanted to discuss and their particular interests and concerns, the topics were not stuck to rigidly and the reporting below reflects this.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic all workshop discussions were held online. In total there were 67 participants across all workshops, with the majority of those (39) coming from the three workshops organised by Amina. Workshop participants received vouchers (or other form of thanks depending on the policies of the organising charity) to show appreciation for their valued time and contributions.

The rest of this Annex provides a summary of the main themes of the discussion from each of the workshops organised by the four organisations the Commission partnered with in this work.

The Commission would like to express its thanks once again to the 67 participants who shared their experiences and insights with us.

Aberlour Children's Charity workshop

Participants

- 3 parents from South Ayrshire with between 1 and 4 children in their households, children aging from pre-nursery to approaching high school age.

Topic 1: Financial Support. What support has made it easier or harder financially over the last few years (both pre-COVID and during COVID)? Is there any support that has been particularly helpful or unhelpful?

- Parents mentioned a range of financial support schemes and generally they were viewed positively, including the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods card, and school clothing grant. During the pandemic, payments for free school meals and the one-off hardship payments had made a difference to get through particular points in the year (including the Christmas period).
- The complexity of eligibility was raised as being unhelpful: parents said that people have to be pretty savvy to know how to check about eligibility and when to apply for different benefits, particularly for parents who might have difficulties in learning or understanding these complicated processes. Some parents had just received their first Scottish Child Payment and said that was fairly easy to apply for. Can't the government do more to proactively inform people of their eligibility?
- Parents mentioned that it would be better if deadlines for the application process were based on what parents/carers are really concerned about, not administrative dates. E.g. people want to know the date that money will be in their accounts, not just when a decision will be made by the organisation assessing their application. It would be good if the government/others made available paper applications as well as online, for those who can't use a computer/phone.
- Participants felt that in several areas (e.g. school clothing grants) eligibility based on age could unfairly disadvantage younger pre-school children who still need clothing appropriate for nursery. They also said that while children got free meals at nursery, they were not entitled to any money to replace that when nurseries were closed due to COVID-19, unlike school age children. While the financial support for clothing was appreciated, they felt that in some cases it was insufficient to provide school age children with appropriate clothing. Kids are hard on clothes and reusing older children's clothes for younger ones isn't always possible. Participants mentioned that they felt younger children are more likely to have suffered through COVID-19 than

older ones and that there was inconsistent support for younger pre-school children in response to this. Other inconsistencies were mentioned: e.g. children who do not choose to take up their free school meals eligibility not receiving related financial support was seen as unfair.

- One participant described a situation they are still attempting to resolve around Child Benefit payments that they are due, but they have not received due to administrative mistakes that they are attempting to resolve with the help of Aberlour and their MP. This has caused them stress and hardship.
- One participant felt that, while application processes for Scottish support schemes they applied for generally worked ok, they felt the Best Start Foods card should have a separate application process as they were made to go through the full application process of applying for the grant when they only wanted to add a card.

Topic 2: Employment. In terms of support for employment, what actions are the best/most important to help people to work as well as care for children? Is there anything that the government or local authority that is doing just now that is not working?

- Participants felt that safe, appropriate and flexible childcare was crucial to allow them to work. Some participants wanted to work, but couldn't due to needing to care for pre-nursery age children and could not find/afford childminding.
- For a parent who had previously worked unsociable hours in two jobs, they felt there was no support from the government in terms of helping them find safe and appropriate childcare where they live. The support that exists locally was not flexible enough for their circumstances and for various reasons they could not always rely on family to assist. They wanted more support with childcare for people working non-standard hours.
- The difference in support by age, with little support for children younger than 2, was a barrier to work. Participants asked if there could be support to help fill the current gap that exists in early learning and childcare eligibility for support pre-2.

Topic 3: Housing. How are your needs being met by the Scottish Government/Local Authority when it comes to housing?

- Participants raised complaints over the way housing stock is used in their area, with houses suitable for larger families being used for couples. Some felt very strongly that in South Ayrshire family needs are not being met by the availability of housing, which has been made worse by COVID-19 pressures and new people needing housing. Where housing did become available it was often in areas with poor transport links.
- Participants highlighted numerous problems with the housing stock that they had experienced: a main concern being poor insulation (resulting in unnecessarily high fuel costs). Some participants were living in houses that were overcrowded. Additional problems like damp and the impact that was having on their families' health were also described.
- The cost of gas and electricity was a particular problem. Some participants said they had been helped by Cold Weather Payments, and some had got money towards the cost of heating through their children's school, but they felt the government could do more to help families with the costs of heating.
- Participants described that, where improvements were being made, they could be short-term and not looking to longer-term value for money (e.g. replacement of a heating system with oil rather than one based on renewable energy).
- Participants felt that the government and local authority should not provide housing with these sort of problems to families and that all housing stock should be assessed as to whether they are of a liveable standard and, if not, repaired before families are allowed to live in them.
- Support schemes for private lets (e.g. warmer homes scheme) should be available to those in local authority housing also as the problems can be the same.

Contact (the charity for families with disabled children) workshop

Participants

- 15 parents/carers who are being supported by Contact from a range of geographic areas across Scotland.

Topic 1: Financial Support. What support has made it easier or harder financially over the last few years (both pre-COVID and during COVID)? Is there any support that has been particularly helpful or unhelpful?

- When participants were asked to respond to a poll asking whether financially things have gotten easier, harder or stayed the same over the last few years, around two thirds said they felt things had gotten harder with the remainder split evenly between “gotten easier” and “staying the same”.
- A participant who found things easier reported doing so as a result of extra support with energy costs, foodbank options and the support they have received through organisations like Contact.
- Several participants noted “postcode lottery” experiences where services and access to support differs substantially (and for no good reason) by geographic location. In particular it was noted that people who need support do not necessarily live in areas designated as requiring support/services (e.g. because of area measures of deprivation). The example was given that if you lost your job there was nothing available to help you if you lived in a better off area.
- In contrast, some participants noted that, for them, their location “means nothing” and despite being in a deprived area, they are not entitled to support. A participant noted that this put them in the position of receiving less support and are relatively worse off than families in their area that they supported (in a professional capacity through their work in the community).
- Participants described that people on the “cusp” of various cut-off points for the receipt of benefits and services could experience particular difficulties: they get knocked back because the system “thinks they should be doing alright”.
- The additional carers payment was reported as being welcome for those who received it.

- Some other participants reported charities as being the main means of support – this was problematic as word of mouth was one of the main ways in which people find out about charities, which reinforces the postcode lottery.
- A participant noted that the shielding food box was not helpful for them, because its contents were not sensitive to minority ethnic diets and requirements.
- There was a concern that people who receive no help are just “forgotten about” and left to get on with it. This was particularly the case for people who were shielding who described vicious cycles of mental health decline.
- Some criticised the allocation of funding in their area for support as not being put to best use. E.g. a charity spending on recreational/social activity like flower-arranging classes rather than supporting vulnerable people more directly with fundamental standard-of-living issues.
- One participant said that it was better for their mental health to work but they could then lose Carer’s Allowance if they were asked to work extra hours.
- A participant described their fears when the £20 Universal Credit uplift is withdrawn in that people have got used to budgeting with it, and that its withdrawal may drive people further down into poverty.

Topic 2: Actions in the child poverty delivery plan.

- Participants were asked if they were aware of any of a list of actions from the child poverty plan: about 85% were aware of some, 1 respondent said they were aware of all the actions, and 1 that was aware of none of the actions.

Social Security

- The Best Start Grant and its relatively low threshold (receipt of UC) was mentioned as a positive support by a participant. Others mentioned that their Disability Living Allowance (DLA) was crucial to support them financially: “otherwise I wouldn’t be able to survive”.
- Participants discussed difficulties in accessing the benefits that they were entitled to. As the group were carers of disabled children there was a particular focus on DLA. One participant remarked that their DLA application was so easy to do this time, because there was so much negative evidence of all the bad things that have happened this year. They also said they were not

aware of DLA entitlements they could have had from their child's birth, because nobody told them and they only found out about it through word of mouth at a later date. One participant said that they might have been told in hospital when their baby was in intensive care, but that they were not able to take the information in then and the information needed to be repeated to parents at other times to make sure they were aware of it.

- One participant drew a contrast between the apparent ease with which the government was able to issue a shielding letter, but that you need to go through such a series of elaborate processes and checks to receive support for a condition that means you have to shield.
- There was anger at the DLA application process, and a feeling that the system is “designed to fail you”. One participant described getting a higher level of DLA when a welfare rights advisor filled in the application than when they did it themselves. Trying to access a welfare rights officers was reported as a challenge at the moment by participants.

Employment

- Similar to the previous topic, participants noted that some of the employment support implemented by local authority results in geographical differences around support that were perceived as unfair. Other support provided locally also results in differences/difficulties in access by area, e.g. a participant from a rural community noted their nearest foodbank was a 100 mile round trip away.
- Participants said that employment for them needed to be flexible and that this could be hard to find – many needed a job to fit around childcare responsibilities. Several participants wanted to work, but felt they had to “go begging” for some support to be able to do so. Some also talked about how employment meant they could lose Carer's Allowance: “So do I work for nothing?”
- When talking about the degree to which support effectively met needs in general, one participant noted that while the schemes and support offered “ticks the right boxes” (so that governments can say they are doing X, Y, and Z) and sound good in isolation, they do not always make a difference to real-life situations because they don't work well together or when they come into contact with reality. Participants did not recognise themselves or their lives in

official descriptions and plans of support.

- While the principle of expanded early learning and childcare (ELC) was generally welcomed, participants discussed various ways in which they felt they were not well served by childcare support during the crisis, particularly specialist caring support that their children need: one participant described how they had to go on sick leave over the summer to care for their child because the after school club could not support their child's additional needs.
- Some participants said that on paper the nursery hours looked good but that they were not getting the benefit out of the ELC expansion that they should. A specific issue was that for some children with additional needs and health conditions it can be difficult to find ELC where the staff are trained to meet their needs, and it may be more appropriate to provide care at home. However, the ELC funded hours cannot be used in a child's own home, even if ELC is being provided in the home by a trained child carer who is following the early years curriculum.
- A participant identified that, particularly in the case of care of the child with a disability, professional services and support should respect the parent as the expert on their own child.

Topic 3: Other ideas and suggestions for action

- A participant suggested creating family case studies to reality-check support schemes against different scenarios to see if they work, instead of putting money into lots of different funds or support scheme boxes without checking to see if they work in real life. One participant felt that government "blundered around" firing money into different funds without checking to see if the funds were delivering what they were supposed to. Particularly noted was a gap in support around young adulthood (18 to 25 year olds) when young adults transition out of a service for young people
- Parents should be more involved in shared decisions over care, and governments need to provide funding for services like Contact that know people and their lives better. There is money and support out there but people don't know if they qualify and services like Contact provide that information. In general participants felt the government should work better and more directly with charities, including to assess the needs of families and provide funding they needed. Some participants felt that if this was done it would result in less extreme negative outcomes than they had experienced, for example, calling

social services on themselves so they could get some respite from care of their disabled child.

- A participant suggested that Carer's Allowance should not be means-tested and DLA should not make parents reapply every two years when a child's condition was not going to change.
- Most participants noted that when asked about how they got their information, many got their information from another parent or friend, less so from local authorities or the Scottish Government official sources.

Fife gingerbread workshop

Participants

- 10 parents/carers who are in contact with Fife Gingerbread, who provide support and advice for lone parents and families in Fife.

Topic 1: Financial Support. What support has made it easier or harder financially over the last few years (both pre-COVID and during COVID)? Is there any support that has been particularly helpful or unhelpful?

- Some participants reported suffering since the move to Universal Credit, feeling that things have got worse and more expensive as a result of general economic changes (particularly rising energy bills), but also noted particular issues with UC including reporting a lot of hassle around deductions and knowing the right “cliff edges” – where participants have to work only so many hours a week to be best off. Choosing to move to fortnightly UC has been beneficial for some in terms of budgeting.
- There was some positive recognition of Scottish Social Security payments including the Scottish Child Payment, though some participants did not recognise exactly which schemes they received or were entitled to (or that they had received, in the case of some automated payments).
- One participant also mentioned the Easter COVID-19 hardship payment and another thought the COVID-19 self-isolation payment was good, as it had been changed to help parents and carers who had to self-isolate.
- Local authority support for school meals replacement was reported as being particularly valued. Cash was valued over food packages, which participants said varied in quality. One participant noted that the issue of no equivalent to the Free School Meal payment for younger, nursery age children was they considered insulting to parents of younger children. Younger children were no longer getting fed at nursery and parents felt it was an issue of equity.
- Local charities and organisations have also helped with food, and to bridge the gap between UC payments, as have local foodbanks. The support for early learning/schooling and child entertainment during lockdown provided by voluntary organisations was also valued.

- One participant reported seeking the help of their MP to resolve a dispute they were engaged in around UC and as a result of their intervention they got the situation resolved.

Topic 2: Actions in the Child Poverty Delivery Plan

- Scottish Child Payment: Participants who recognised and received this payment appreciated that it was a cash payment that they could decide what to spend on.
- Best Start Grant & Best Start Foods: Participants who received the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods were positive about them, but preferred the card for Best Start Foods, which allowed more choice over products bought rather than vouchers. One participant said that they thought Best Start Foods should carry on until children were five.
- Early Learning and Childcare expansion: Views were mixed, mostly seeming to depend on whether the participant's circumstances allowed them to take advantage of the expansion. Those who could benefit appreciated it, and one participant said that they were only able to start work because they accessed ELC and saved money, but some struggled to get a job positioned around the times where expanded ELC is available in their area and so it was of limited use to them.
- Out of school childcare: In relation to after school clubs some participants mentioned age relevancy and that there needs to be an offer of clubs for younger as well as older children. For those living in rural or remoter areas the usefulness of these schemes is also tied into transport links – if transport links are poor or not timed well it can prevent parents/carers from using the clubs. For holiday clubs, some participants did not know these schemes existed, and another did not feel it was particularly helpful for people on low incomes.
- School clothing grant: The school clothing grant was appreciated as a means to help families provide the essentials. Some participants felt that the sum provided was not enough for older children, though they generally felt it was enough for younger ones.
- Employment support: several participants did not recognise Fair Start Scotland by name. Instead participants talked about several local schemes and support such as that ran by Gingerbread, including assistance with CV writing, as being helpful.

- Heating and energy efficiency: Participants talked about several local schemes that they had received assistance from regarding insulation, metering and tariffs and other means to reduce energy bills. Prior to getting the local support several participants had been spending several hundreds of pounds per month on gas heating their properties alone.
- Affordable homes: Participants who commented on this emphasised that while it is welcome to build new houses, they were concerned that there is insufficient related infrastructure (GPs, school places etc.) to support the new builds, which will limit access to public services in the face of increased demand.
- Money Talk Team: While participants had not heard of Money Talk Team, they were getting support to maximise their income and cut costs through a partnership between Citizens Advice, Rights Fife and Fife Gingerbread.

Topic 3: Other ideas and suggestions for action

- Participants suggested that lack of information about entitlement remains a problem and suggested that when a new scheme or benefit is brought in, the information should be pushed out through job centres, GPs, schools etc. to raise awareness of them. At the moment a lot of people find out about these through word of mouth.
- It would be particularly beneficial if everything that you may be entitled to – if you are already on UC – could be highlighted more clearly. In addition, your UC journal should highlight what services and support is available in your community.
- Support from specialists (e.g. CARF workers) to help explain the system to you was reported as useful by some participants. Though some did highlight that when they had seen themselves as fighting the system for so long, it was hard to go along with it and they were initially resistant.
- Foodbanks: while participants said these were useful and help people in poverty, a lot of people were struggling getting to the food banks and again highlighted the problem of transport accessibility of these venues for people on low incomes.
- Some participants said there was an issue with hidden rural poverty, where communities get less funding and access to services is poor.

- In the summing up of the discussion in the breakout groups that ended this part of the session the following things were noted:
 - Not really knowing what is out there and what you are eligible for remains a major problem.
 - More funding for local support groups as they best understand the needs of the people that access them.
 - Resolving transport issues: transport is expensive and there is not always equal access to facilities and support.
 - Flexible childcare and a wrap-around approach.
 - Government offering childcare for out of work or looking for work families in particular.
 - Payments being more universal rather than based on needing to constantly reapply to different schemes and pots of money (e.g. one set of schemes apply for a child of 4 or younger, but when they turn 5 you need to apply for a different set – why can't this be done through an online portal where you can reapply with a click?)

Amina workshops

Participants

- Three workshops conducted with 39 women in total, attended by Muslim and minority ethnic women, mostly from Glasgow and Edinburgh.
- The structure of these workshops and approach to the themed discussion was tailored by Amina staff in order to be culturally sensitive and create a conducive and safe environment for the women who participated.

Topic 1: How have you been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Financially, are you able to get the food and other items you need? Are you able to get help from family and friends or from services?

- Participants highlighted the significant challenges to their lives as a result of the impact of COVID-19. Individual circumstances and the degree to which individuals felt they/their families were coping varied, but a range of serious negative impacts were raised. The additional impact of COVID-19 on widening existing inequalities (e.g. added pressure on parents/carers to address health needs of those they care for that have been exacerbated by the pandemic) was noted.
- The challenge of living in lockdown for children and parents was a theme, particularly for families who had housing with inadequate space for their children to play and learn. Participants reported that home schooling has been a real challenge with children becoming bored and depressed. In terms of recreation during lockdown, some participants highlighted that they lacked the financial (and other) means to entertain their children with the things that their children's friends were able to enjoy (for example toys and games, space to play). A participant expressed concern at the impact of prolonged periods of online learning and recreation on children, and another highlighted that their living environment was unsafe, with cars and bicycles being vandalised.
- Some supporting measures, such as the provision of school meals and packs sent by schools were cited as being helpful. Some individual participants also highlighted that their families were also helpful and that they were lucky to have their support.

- Participants described the challenges of successfully managing physical and mental health during the pandemic, with little opportunity to take children out and enrich their lives, to manage and attend hospital appointments, and the particular negative impact on those whose health conditions required them to shield.
- In general participants indicated a lack of awareness as to what support with financial hardship was available to them during the pandemic. The main support participants were aware of was equipment.

Topic 2: Have you noticed any extra help or support for families that has helped you have a bit more money? This could be from the Government or from other sources in our communities? Has anything been disappointing?

- Participants expressed views about a range of support and challenges that they had noticed. An issue raised several times was housing, with participants reporting negatives related to housing including poor quality/inappropriate housing and issues with maintenance. A participant felt that support relating to housing could not be made use of effectively by those who are tenants rather than homeowners (e.g. in the case of boiler replacement they felt the tenant still ends up with the bills as the owner is not eligible or does not want to take action).
- Some financial support was positively regarded, including the Winter Fuel Payment, discounts for energy efficient homes, and Best Start Vouchers – for these, flexibility of vouchers for multiple shops rather than being restricted to one was cited as a big positive.
- Participants mentioned positive support received from community groups, but also indicated a lack of awareness about how to access support/services of certain kinds in their local area (for example, where to access foodbank vouchers).
- Frustration about persistent inequalities in circumstances were described by participants. For example, why does one area in a city have nothing for children while other areas have ample facilities? Or, as another participant put it in relation to housing: *“You can’t help being homeless. You can’t change the situation one is in. If you don’t speak about this, you will not get help. I am not*

happy; I can't keep complaining it is shameful. Where is the way out from this?"

Topic 3: Can you think of anything else the Scottish Government could do to support families and would any of the actions be better if they were delivered in a different way?

- Participants gave a range of reflections and recommendations for the Scottish Government, which tended to focus on the topics of their children, transport, and food security:
 - Their personal experiences of persistent cycles of poverty and inequality and their children being treated differently from other children; there should be activities for getting children together as groups and sharing the same experiences, not just children from one area having a good experience that is not shared by others. There are particular barriers experienced by children of asylum seekers and refugees and this could be address by increased focus on reducing social isolation for children from these families.
 - A persistent experience of a “post code lottery” when it comes to services, resources and facilities for families and children.
 - Transportation costs are a major issue. Paying for bus fares to get to necessary medical appointments or travel to shops that sell culturally appropriate food can be prohibitively expensive. This also limits access to support, e.g., foodbanks that offer Halal or African food. Because there is such a variety of support depending on where you live, the prohibitive cost of transport (to, e.g. access support in another area) reinforces inequality.
 - Many problems are caused by a lack of information: the sense from participants was that a lot of key information about support for families is not widely known and understood in their communities and as a result people do not know what do ask for. While participants acknowledged that leaflets and so on may be out there somewhere, they were not seen to be available within their own communities.
 - Language continues to be a barrier both in general and for some specific cases. For example, a participants described how an attempt to get support for caring through their local authority fell through due to

language barriers. Another participant described a situation where, due to a language barrier, they were unaware of and unable to access a substantial sum already loaded onto their Best Start card.

- There was a sense of participant desire to become financially independent, and yet while several participants had significant employability skills they were not able to translate these effectively into employability, implying support to focus on drawing out these skills into employment situations may be helpful.